

# Doctors Asked to Fight Seductive Killer

The #1 one killer of preschool kids in Arizona sparkles with sunlit, seductive glamour, luring toddlers into its lethal grasp — but state health officials say that with the help of alert adults, the killer is conquerable.

The killer, of course, is water .... water in canals, lakes, rivers and decorative ponds, but mostly water in backyard swimming pools. And Arizona's physicians are being asked to man the front lines in the battle to educate and raise the consciousness levels of Arizona's adults, particularly the parents of children at risk.

"People don't tend to view their pool as the #1 hazard to their children's lives," one expert observes, "but we need to urge them to think of their pool as being as deadly and dangerous as the traffic in the street out front."

In fact, drowning kills more children under age 5 than any other factor, surpassing both traffic accidents and illness as the primary cause of death of children aged one through four. And in Arizona, it's not just a summer hazard; it's a 12-month-a-year hazard lurking in our lives, often on our property, threatening our children.

The tragedy, officials say, is that drowning is preventable. Physicians are being urged to share some basic information with patients who are parents of small children.

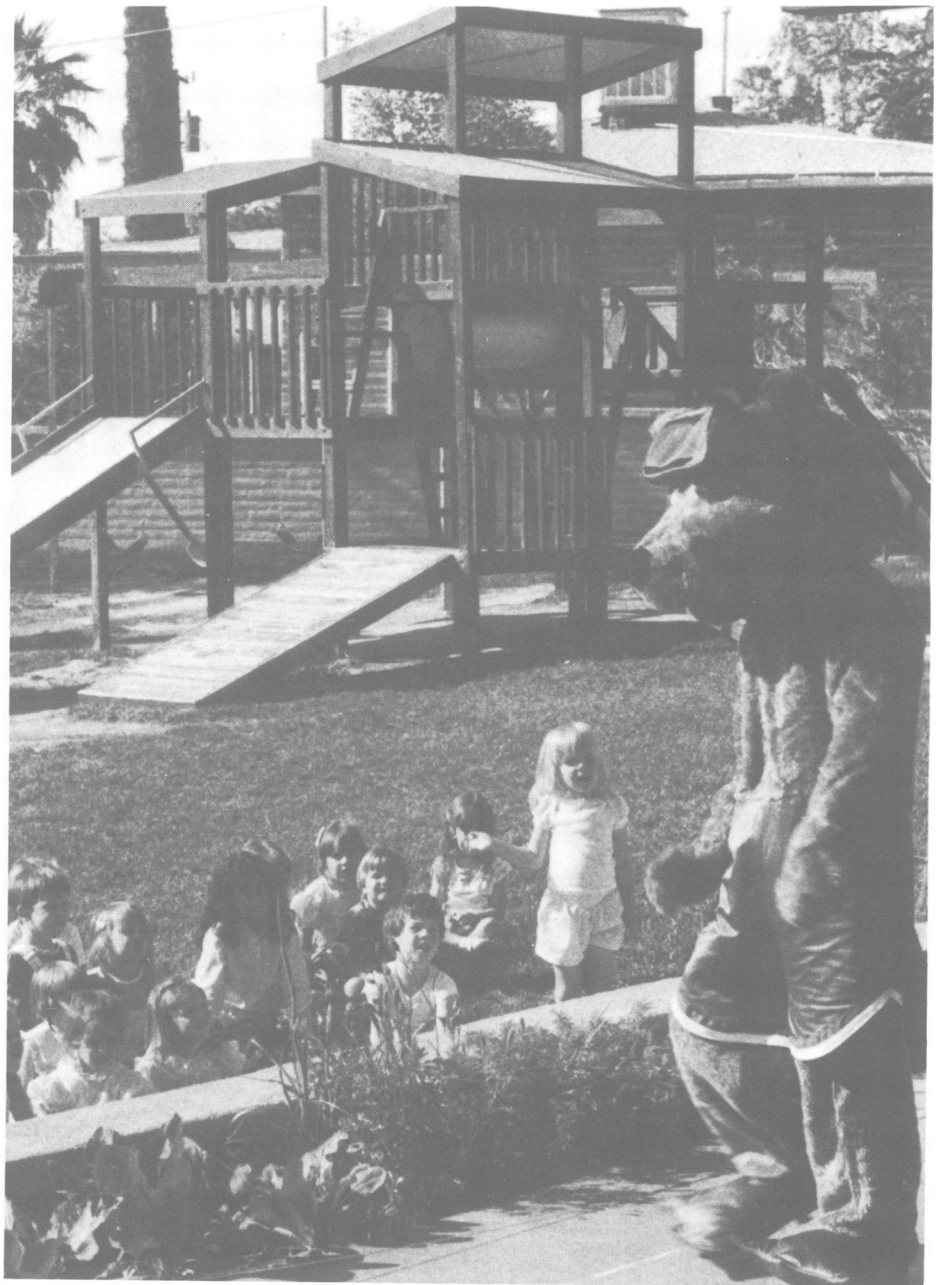
This is the state's third annual "Children Aren't Waterproof" drowning campaign. Colorful, attractive and easy-to-read brochures are available, free of charge and in quantity, to physicians for distribution to patients. Brochures may be obtained by contacting the Community

Health Education Office at Tucson Medical Center, (602) 327-5461.

According to Barbara Smith, M.D., Tucson pediatrician, and Chairman of the Accident and Injury Prevention Committee of

the Arizona Chapter of the American Academy of Pediatrics, the biggest challenge of the ongoing educational campaign is to make people, especially parents, aware that drowning is a major health problem. "People just don't realize

*Photo by Susan Fuchs*



**St. Joseph's Hospital water safety spokesman Oliver Otter, complete with goggles and bathing suit, shares swimming rules with pupils at the Montessori Day School in Phoenix as the state's third annual "Children Aren't Waterproof" drowning prevention campaign begins. Physicians are asked to stress the need for water safety to patients who are parents.**

how serious this is," Dr. Smith said. "They worry about their kids playing in the street and the danger of traffic, but they need to realize the backyard can be just as dangerous."

Supervision is the key to protecting small children, Dr. Smith said. If physicians only get one bit of information across to their patients who are parents of small children, it is that toddlers need to be watched every moment when they have access to the backyard pool.

"The biggest cause of drowning incidents is parental distraction," she said. "The phone rings or something else happens which takes the parent's attention away from the child at the pool, even for just a moment. And children can move quickly. It only takes a moment for a child to get in serious trouble."

Physicians also need to let their patients know that small children do not necessarily make noise when they fall in the pool. Toddler drownings are usually very silent incidents.

"Tiny children don't make much of a splash, and they don't have the muscles to hold their heads up and yell for help. Parents think they'll hear something if their child falls in, but that's not true," she said.

"Barriers are the next most important protection after supervision," Dr. Smith said. "Physicians should point out to parents that locked gates do not substitute for supervision, but they can give parents a couple of moments of leeway if the child gets out of sight for a moment."

"Gates should have a self-closing and automatic locking mechanism, and fence uprights should be five feet tall and no more than three and three-quarter inches apart," she said.



"City codes sometimes call for a maximum of five inches between the bars of fences," she said, "but we've done demonstrations showing a toddler squeezing through a five-inch wide space."

"Parents especially should be warned not to self-defeat their protective systems," she said. "We see too many cases of tragedy that happened because a self-locking gate was propped open, or because the latch got rusty and didn't close properly."

"CPR and a portable telephone near the pool can save lives if tragedy does occur," she added. "If parents have a pool, they should be currently trained in CPR; when CPR is performed immediately, any child will have a better chance of survival than if it has to wait for emergency personnel to arrive." The telephone should have the emergency rescue phone number and the address of the home attached, so visiting relatives or baby sitters will know where to call for help and can tell rescuers exactly where to come.

"Finally," Dr. Smith said, "physicians should make sure parents

understand that tiny children cannot be 'drownproofed'."

"Swimming lessons are wonderful as far as having a good time, one on one, where your toddler is concerned," she said, "but swimming lessons cannot be relied upon to give a tiny child the ability to save himself if he falls in the pool. Parents should never let themselves get complacent. They must understand that children must be watched around water, and physicians are in a position to get that fact across to them." ■

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